

Reno to meet King's widow over possible investigation

Family argues that convicted murderer James Earl Ray is innocent

BY ANDREW COHEN
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Thirty years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, the U.S. Justice Department will hear an appeal from his widow for a new investigation into the death of the most celebrated spokesman of the civil-rights movement.

Attorney-General Janet Reno plans to meet with Coretta Scott King, probably this week, to discuss her call for a national commission on the murder of her husband on a motel balcony in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968.

Mrs. King and her four children argue that convicted murderer James Earl Ray is innocent, even though he pleaded guilty in 1969 and is serving a 99-year sentence. (He has contended for years he was coerced and framed by a mysterious figure he knew only as Raoul.)

The King family have said the murder was part of a conspiracy fostered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other government agencies, in collusion with the Mafia, possibly with the knowledge of President Lyndon Johnson. The purpose was to silence Mr. King, who was a fervent opponent of the Vietnam War and the most eloquent champion of black Americans of his time.

The incendiary allegations may be one of the reasons the White House has been cool to the request for a new investigation.

But on Monday, after returning from Africa where he apologized for slavery in the United States, President Bill Clinton asked Ms. Reno to meet Mrs. King, giving some hope to the family and others who argue his murder was not the act of one man acting alone.

"Given the President's respect for Mrs. King, given his concern for her strong argument, he felt it appropriate for the Attorney-General to hear that argument," presidential spokesman Mike McCurry said.

Ms. Reno called Mrs. King, "they had a nice chat and are working to set up a meeting this week," Justice Department spokesman Bert Brandenburg said.

The administration has said in the past that the executive branch should not intervene in a judicial matter. But with Mrs. King's latest appeal, the



Coretta Scott King, shown last year with her son Dexter on the 29th anniversary of her husband's death, hopes for an inquiry. (Reuters)

President seems to have had a change of heart. Conscious of maintaining his popularity among blacks, Mr. Clinton might not have wanted to be seen to be dismissing a new investigation into Mr. King's death, especially at a moment when his life and legacy are in the public consciousness.

Mrs. King, the elegant, soft-spoken

woman who has quietly carried on her husband's work for three decades, said the other investigations have never unearthed the truth of who shot Mr. King at the Lorraine Motel.

"We feel that a federal investigation might get to the bottom of this, since the State of Tennessee hasn't come up with anything," she said at Mr. King's crypt in Atlanta last week. "It is deeply disappointing to me that there is a large body of evidence concerning the investigation which has never been seriously considered."

She hopes for an inquiry modelled on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which is tracing the atrocities committed under apartheid. Like that commission, she said, it should grant immunity to those who want to testify. "I think that such a commission could make a major contribution to the interracial healing and reconciliation in America."

Other investigations have failed to find conclusive evidence that the assassin was anyone but Mr. Ray, who recanted three days after his guilty plea and has been trying to obtain a new trial ever since. Mr. Ray, 70, is gravely ill and wants to clear his name before he dies.

The latest investigation was con-

ducted by Memphis district attorney William Gibbons, who issued a report last month saying that Mr. Ray was the killer and he could find no co-conspirators. His probe dismissed arguments that were not addressed in the two other investigations, one by Memphis authorities in 1968 and 1969 and the other by a select committee of the House of Representatives in 1978 and 1979.

A key allegation it examined was that a New York man named Raoul was behind a plot to kill Mr. King. Mr. Gibbons concluded that he had nothing to do with the assassination.

The publication of the third report, only 10 days before the anniversary of the assassination, has led experts to wonder why Mrs. King and her family are pursuing the investigation.

Why, then, do a majority of Americans agree with the King family that there was a conspiracy? Gerald Posner, a lawyer who has written books denying conspiracies in the murders of both John Kennedy and Mr. King, says one reason is that Tennessee accepted Mr. Ray's plea bargain and didn't hold a trial in 1969. This meant that the prosecution and the defence never had a chance to present their cases in court, which would have provided a body of documents.

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